United Nations A/55/397

General Assembly

Distr.: General
19 September 2000

Original: English

Fifty-fifth session
Agenda items 123 and 126

Human resources management

Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Follow-up audit of the recruitment process in the Office of Human Resources Management

Note by the Secretary-General

1. Pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 48/218 B of 29 July 1994 and 54/244 of 23 December 1999, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit, for the attention of the General Assembly, the attached report, conveyed to him by the Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services, on the follow-up audit of the recruitment process in the Office of Human Resources Management.

2. The Secretary-General takes note of the findings of the report and concurs with its recommendations. The Secretary-General expresses his appreciation to the Office of Internal Oversight Services for its work in conducting this important audit, and for its many useful recommendations. He also appreciates the consultative approach the OIOS has adopted in conducting the audit. The Secretary-General wishes to note that the audit duly recognizes the efforts and achievements of the Office of Human Resources Management and the Secretariat as a whole in reforming the recruitment process in the past three years, and that a snapshot taken at this time, when many new initiatives have begun, yet the old infrastructure is still standing, inevitably reveals a situation of uneven progress. Viewed from a distance, the picture should be one of growth and progressive development. The Secretary-General expresses his hope that the OIOS will continue to be engaged in the reform and contribute to its success.

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Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the follow-up audit of the recruitment process in the Office of Human Resources Management

Summary

In the three years since the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) issued its management audit report on recruitment, the subject has received a great deal of attention within the Organization. There have been numerous task forces, newsletters, Staff Management Coordination Committee meetings and reform initiatives devoted to improving the recruitment process. Drawing upon the expert advice contained in the task force reports, the Office of Human Resources Management developed a reform proposal within the context of the Secretary-General's overall reform programme of strengthening the staff of the Organization and submitted it to the Staff Management Consultative Committee in April 2000.

While OIOS' original audit report focused mainly on the administrative aspects of the recruitment procedures, the current report assesses the progress made in improving the management of the Organization's recruitment process. On the positive side, OHRM has made progress towards reforming and refining specific elements of the recruitment process by:

(a) Creating departmental action plans, sustained by newly developed human resources indicators, which provide baseline data for management to help focus their recruitment efforts;

(b) Reducing the recruitment timeline by one third;

(c) Improving the management of the National Competitive Examination programme, and properly updating the roster, thereby increasing the number of such candidates recruited;

(d) Eliminating the requirements for pre-review letters and collateral reviews;

(e) Introducing the Rectrack System to monitor the recruitment process;

(f) Including core values and core competencies in the vacancy announcement and interview process.

The Office of Human Resources Management has developed many initiatives to reform the recruitment process during the past few years. However, the OIOS believes the Office now needs to establish a strategic plan that would integrate these initiatives under a single umbrella to enable the Organization to meet evolving staffing needs and to transform the current cumbersome and time-consuming process into a more proactive and flexible activity. The need for this type of planning is even more urgent given the increased number of retirements expected Organization-wide over the next few years.

To date, the Office of Human Resources Management's emphasis has been on the process itself, including such activities as making administrative rule changes and constructing individual databases. From a policy perspective, the Office needs to determine what its human resources management and recruitment goals are and what actions should be taken to accomplish these goals in line with departmental business

plans. Each initiative, reform and procedural change must be analysed within this comprehensive framework to determine how it will support the overall goal.

The present report proposes specific actions that should be taken to expedite and improve the management of the recruitment process. However, the larger policy issue of establishing overall recruitment goals and strategies must first be addressed. Other key recommendations include the following:

(a) Providing operational guidance for implementation of human resources targets by programme managers to achieve geographic distribution and gender balance;

(b) Integrating individual recruitment approaches and monitoring their achievement;

(c) Further refining benchmarks for performance monitoring on recruitment;

(d) Conducting in-depth analyses of human resources statistics as a basis for strategic planning;

(e) Improving recruitment processes to ensure operational efficiency and effectiveness, particularly regarding vacancy announcement circulation and roster management;

(f) Evaluating the effectiveness of the current National Competitive Examination programme to better serve managerial needs.

The report also includes a preliminary assessment of the Office of Human Resources Management's recently issued proposal on recruitment, promotion and placement, which had not progressed beyond the conceptual framework status at the time of the audit. This reform proposal, which addresses managerial accountability and empowerment and outlines a streamlined recruitment process, does attempt to establish the recruitment framework recommended by OIOS. However, many of the necessary operational details, which would govern the proposed recruitment process, had not yet been developed when OIOS conducted this audit. Nevertheless, OIOS supports the approach and encourages the Office of Human Resources Management to actively pursue the adoption of this proposal.

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I. Introduction

1. In his report to the General Assembly on human resources management reform (A/53/414), the Secretary-General expressed his commitment to strategic change in human resources management to ensure the successful implementation of reform measures. At the heart of this reform process is the need to align the Organization's human resource capacity with its mission, structure and culture. The Office of Human Resources Management has since proposed a number of initiatives to improve the human resources management process.

2. In 1996, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) performed a management audit of the United Nations recruitment process, and identified a number of areas requiring management's attention to ensure a more simplified, efficient and effective recruitment system. The revelation that the average recruitment processing time was 461 days attracted attention from Member States and other observers of the Organization as well as its managers and staff members. Considering the gravity of this issue, OIOS decided to reassess the recruitment process in the year 2000 and to report its findings to the General Assembly. While the original audit focused mainly on the administration of the recruitment procedures, the current audit also assessed the progress made in improving the management of the Organization's recruitment process during the interim period. OIOS conducted the audit between January and March 2000. The audit included a review of relevant documents available at the time of the audit.

3. The objectives of the current audit were to:

(a) Determine whether recruitment strategies are aligned with established goals, coordinated by the Office of Human Resources Management's planning section, and properly monitored and evaluated;

(b) Ascertain whether current processes ensure effective and efficient management of the Organization's recruitment activities.

4. In January 1998, the Secretary-General convened a Task Force on Human Resource Management, chaired by the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resource Management. The Task Force's mandate was twofold:

(a) To focus on a plan for the renewal of the Organization, including the ability to attract, motivate, develop and retain a cadre of competent staff;

(b) To simplify the current regime of rules, which had become overly complex and cumbersome.

5. The major focus of the Task Force was on the second dimension of its mandate, that is, how to simplify the processing of candidates. In fact, a number of the task force proposals addressed the need to improve the recruitment process by making it more equitable, flexible, transparent and timely. In OIOS' opinion, the more critical component of the mandate, that of identifying, attracting and retaining appropriate personnel, was not fully addressed.

6. The subsequent proposal was presented and discussed with senior management of the Organization and the Staff Management Consultative Committee in 1999. In March 2000, the Office of Human Resources Management issued a revised reform proposal on recruitment, placement and promotion for discussion at the meeting of the Staff Management Consultative Committee, held from 27 April to 5 May 2000. This proposal, which was intended for discussion purposes and therefore consisted of a conceptual framework, outlines several changes to the current recruitment process. OIOS reviewed this proposal. However, because the operational specifics were still being developed, OIOS' evaluation was limited to reviewing the conceptual framework as put forward by the Office of Human Resources Management at the time of the audit.

7. A draft of the present report was made available to the Office of Human Resources Management for their review. Their comments have been taken into account and appear in italics.

II. Overall planning and strategy development

8. The Secretary-General's vision of 1997 for managing the Organization called for "a simplified structure that avoids duplication and achieves greater impact; empowered and responsible staff and managers; a leaner and more efficient United Nations Secretariat; and an organization that fosters

management excellence and is accountable for achieving results determined by the Member States".[1]

9. The Office of Human Resources Management has since introduced numerous initiatives which have made progress towards reforming and refining specific elements of the recruitment process by:

(a) Creating departmental action plans and indicators, which provide baseline data for management to help focus their recruitment efforts;

(b) Reducing the recruitment timeline by one third;

(c) Improving the management of the National Competitive Examination programme, and properly updating the roster, thereby increasing the number of such candidates recruited;

(d) Eliminating the requirement for pre-review letters and collateral reviews in filling vacancies;

(e) Developing the Rectrack System to monitor the recruitment process;

(f) Introducing core values and core competencies in the vacancy announcement and interview process.

10. The Office of Human Resources Management has developed several initiatives to reform the recruitment process during the past few years. However, OIOS believes that the Office now needs to establish a strategic plan that would integrate these initiatives under a single umbrella and would be aligned with departmental business plans. This would ensure that the Organization attracts and retains quality staff as described in the Secretary-General's vision statement, particularly in a highly competitive environment. Strategic planning is the process by which the guiding members of an organization envision its future and translate the broader vision into specific goals and objectives, incorporating analyses of the current and future environment, and developing short- and long-term action plans for achieving these goals.

11. Using the approach to strategic planning described above to formulate the audit criteria, OIOS sought to determine whether the Office of Human Resources Management had:

(a) Developed recruitment goals incorporating relevant General Assembly mandates and the Secretary-General's vision and whether those goals were clearly articulated throughout the Organization;

(b) Designed short- and long- term strategies based on approved goals and an analysis of data;

(c) Proposed initiatives and procedural reforms that clearly supported the strategy and measurably improved recruitment efforts.

12. The Office of Human Resources Management has identified geographic distribution, gender balance and competency as key elements of its recruitment activities and has introduced initiatives to achieve recruiting goals in these areas. For example, it held planning meetings with heads of departments to address human resources issues, including geographic and gender considerations (see para. 25). Overall, however, the Office needs to clearly articulate stated recruitment goals, which incorporate but are not limited to geographic and gender considerations and develop strategies and action plans to achieve the goals. Then, the achievement of the goals should be properly monitored and measured. In the opinion of OIOS, the Office of Human Resources Management's individual recruitment initiatives, not having been developed in the context of established goals or strategy, were implemented without the ability to measure their impact on the recruitment process as a whole.

A. Target-setting and operational guidance for managers

13. The Office of Human Resources Management disseminates information on the status of its reform effort through a publication entitled *Human Resources Management Highlights*. Its Highlight No. 11 of March 2000 recognized geographical representation and gender balance as organizational human resources goals, which are mandated by the General Assembly. These goals, while clearly crucial to any United Nations recruitment effort, do not by themselves represent sufficient criteria on which to build a recruitment strategy, particularly when the challenges to the Organization in terms of its high vacancy rates, ageing staff and increased responsibilities demand a proactive approach. A proper strategy would have to define what are the desired parameters and staff profiles. To date, there has been progress in achieving geographic and gender distribution goals. The setting

[1] A/51/950, para. 224.

of operational targets must also be complemented with operational guidance for implementation. Monitoring and follow-up are presently being put in place. As the first cycle of departmental plans for 1999-2000 has just been completed, sufficient time has not passed to fully measure progress.

Gender balance

14. In 1990, the General Assembly established a goal of achieving a gender balance of 50/50 by the year 2000 in all categories of posts within the United Nations system. It is apparent, however, that the Organization will not meet this objective. OIOS concluded that the lack of an appropriate strategy that addresses practical issues on the ground contributed to this outcome. Since 1990, a number of initiatives have been introduced, including the creation of the Office of the Focal Point for Women, whose primary responsibilities are to monitor the actions of the appointment and promotion bodies and to identify sources of women candidates for future recruitment. As a major step towards achieving this goal, an administrative instruction on special measures for the achievement of gender equality (ST/AI/1999/9) was issued to give preferential treatment to women in recruitment and promotion. The Office of Human Resources Management also included the element of gender balance in departmental action plans so that it could monitor and evaluate progress made in this area. In the opinion of OIOS, these approaches are the first step in alerting managers to the importance of achieving gender balance. However, at this stage, it is necessary to provide programme managers with specific measurable targets and operational guidelines on how to balance their operational needs against gender considerations to enable the Organization to achieve gender balance.

Geographical distribution

15. Statistics show that, recently, there has been progress in achieving balanced geographical representation within the Organization, particularly with regard to the decline in the number of unrepresented and under-represented countries as shown below.

Number of unrepresented and under-represented countries

30 June 1997	*30 June 1998*	*31 December 1998*	*30 June 1999*	*31 December 1999*	*30 June 2000*
45	35	37	37	27	28

On the other hand, the number of over-represented countries only varied between 13 and 14 over the same period.

16. For balanced geographical representation, national competitive examinations have been held exclusively in countries that are currently or potentially (owing to expected retirements) unrepresented or under-represented. Starting from 1999, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management led focus group meetings with the ambassadors of all the unrepresented and under-represented Member States to attract qualified candidates from those countries. In addition, the Office of Human Resources Management included the element of balanced geographical representation in departmental action plans so that it could monitor and evaluate progress made in this area. These new initiatives have resulted in improvements in geographical distribution, particularly in the number of unrepresented and under-represented countries. OIOS commends the Office of Human Resources Management's continuous effort to improve geographical balance. However, these efforts have largely been limited to encouraging programme managers to recruit candidates from unrepresented or under-represented countries. In the view of OIOS, specific targets and clear operational guidelines are now necessary.

B. Integration of individual approaches

17. Since the Secretary-General stated his vision for management, the Office of Human Resources Management has launched various projects to respond to calls for reform. However, a May 2000 memorandum from the Under-Secretary-General for Management entitled "Managing people, not posts" described the recruitment process as complex. The memorandum also noted that "... planning is absent and decision-making is diffused, leading to lack of accountability. Consequently, the process is not fully trusted by staff and managers find it paper-intensive". In the opinion of OIOS, it is timely to bring these

projects under one umbrella in order to define the impact on the recruitment process. The initiatives discussed below demonstrate the need for a more integrated approach.

Skills inventory

18. This initiative was launched in September 1998 to collect information on the skills, experience, and career development aspirations of staff for inclusion in a comprehensive electronic database. As of 30 June 1999, 5,230 staff had completed the skills inventory survey. The information was to be used for human resources planning, to manage recruitment and placement and to facilitate staff development and career growth. However, this project did not progress beyond the data collection phase. The Office of Human Resources Management attributed this situation to two factors: (a) a low response rate; and (b) software incompatibility.

19. The Office of Human Resources Management is planning to launch a new web-based skills inventory project. This inventory will contain more data that can be accessed by individual staff members at any time and easily updated. To ensure success, the Office of Human Resources Management needs to fully address how this data will be utilized to assist in human resources planning, recruitment and placement. The recently circulated "Reform proposal on recruitment, placement, and promotion" (see paras. 28-31) does not specifically identify how the skills inventory project will be incorporated into the process.

Database management

20. Paragraph 17 of the Secretary-General's report on human resources management reform (A/53/414) states that "... work has begun on making human resources planning part of an integrated management system that enables programme managers to make informed decisions on human resources requirements throughout the Secretariat". At the time of the audit, however, the integrated database was still not available to the Office of Human Resources Management or the programme managers.

21. The first module of the Integrated Management Information System (IMIS) was introduced in 1995 to administer personnel actions. However, according to the Office of Human Resources Management, IMIS data is still not reliable, and often must be adjusted manually. Although the Office uses human resources data aggregated in IMIS, it does not have control over data entries, which are performed by Executive Offices. OIOS noted that the problem has existed for years with no systematic attempt to resolve it. In addition, the system is not geographically integrated. Without further enhancement of IMIS, eight regional databases are manually integrated by the Office of Human Resources Management on a monthly basis to produce the Organization's overall statistics.

22. In 1999, the new Rectrack function was added to IMIS. The Rectrack module was launched on 1 July 1999 at Headquarters to record the steps and time involved in filling vacancies within the Secretariat. Three main benefits were expected: (a) a complete view of the entire recruitment process; (b) on-line access; and (c) monitoring capabilities. However, to date, no report has been made available to managers for monitoring purposes. In addition, the audit showed that records in the database were incomplete and inaccurate. Without adequate data management and monitoring, the Rectrack module will not fulfil its intended purposes.

23. To supplement IMIS, various sections within the Office of Human Resources Management have developed internal databases for their own use. However, since they are not integrated with one another or with IMIS, data is gathered on an ad hoc basis, and is often not reconciled, leading to data integrity and reliability problems.

Exit surveys

24. The Office of Human Resources Management instituted the use of exit surveys in 1999. Staff separating from the Organization have been asked to complete a survey, to enable the Office to ascertain their specific reasons for leaving. However, at the time of the audit, the Office could not provide any data or related analysis. the Office explained that it would conduct the analysis and report the results to the General Assembly later in 2000. Currently, Executive Offices are responsible for conducting exit surveys and forwarding the results to the Office of Human Resources Management. To enhance the independence and usefulness of the survey result, the Office needs to administer and analyse exit surveys directly and on a more systematic basis, and incorporate the results into its planning process.

C. Human resources planning function

25. The Office of Human Resources Management's Human Resources Planning and Management Information Systems Service, with a staff of 21, has primary responsibility for overall human resources management planning. In reality, however, most of the Service's resources are committed to IMIS support activities, such as data cleansing and statistics production, and file maintenance, rather than to planning. Only two temporary junior professional staff are assigned to the planning function, which mainly involves preparing materials for departmental human resources planning meetings (see para. 27).

26. Although the issue of insufficient planning capacity was addressed in the previous OIOS audit, the management of the Office of Human Resources Management has not articulated specific expectations for the Service in terms of performing its centralized planning and coordinating functions. Weaknesses in human resources goal-setting and strategy development have been exacerbated by the Office's limited capacity in overall human resources planning. As a result, various approaches and strategies have been undertaken without proper planning and coordination.

D. Evaluation and monitoring mechanisms

27. In 1999, the Office of Human Resources Management developed departmental human resources action plans and indicators pertaining to such matters as geographic distribution, gender balance, vacancy and promotion, and began to meet individually with each department head to discuss human resources related issues. In the view of OIOS, this initiative enhanced departmental planning and monitoring capacity by providing a comprehensive profile of each department's human resources in the context of these indicators.

28. However, in the opinion of OIOS, further refinement is needed in applying these indicators. Currently, each department's indicators are compared with a Secretariat average or with historical data. Although this comparison highlights each department's status in relation to other departments, it does not necessarily promote improved human resources management. For example, the statistics may reveal that a department has a higher transfer and mobility index than the Secretariat average. However, this raw data, viewed in isolation, does not provide management with meaningful information to enable an assessment of whether the current level is within a desired range or needs to be improved.

29. The Secretary-General's annual report to the General Assembly on the composition of the Secretariat is the most comprehensive snapshot of the Organization's human resources environment. The statistics included in that report form the basis for Member States to evaluate performance and establish priorities/policies for human resources management. The Office of Human Resources Management also uses the information internally for human resources planning and monitoring. The report contains comprehensive information, and has improved in terms of quality and coverage over the years. In the view of OIOS, more detailed analysis of key statistics would improve the report's usefulness as discussed below.

30. The report does not analyse what the human resources statistics mean. For example, the report showed a promotion index of 7.1. However, it is unclear whether this index represented an extreme situation, or an improvement or whether it is a meaningful statistic on which to base decisions. Moreover, certain statistics could be presentec in a manner that would facilitate analysis. For example, recruitment activities were categorized according to initial appointment and reappointment. It would be more meaningful if it further differentiated between internal and external recruitment.

E. Introduction of the reform proposal on recruitment, promotion and placement

31. The revised Office of Human Resources Management reform proposal on the recruitment, placement and promotion system, introduced in March 2000, has the following basic elements:

(a) Full delegation of the selection decision to managers;

(b) Creation of electronic, generic job descriptions to facilitate standard and timely processing;

(c) Development of a roster of qualified candidates as an alternative to the vacancy announcement;

(d) Advance preparation of evaluation criteria;

(e) Replacing the current candidate review with a review of processes by joint staff/management bodies;

(f) Office of Human Resources Management authority to revoke delegations to managers in the event of non-compliance;

(g) A reduced recruitment target timeline of 120 days.

32. OIOS welcomes the introduction of this reform proposal as it addresses many of the weaknesses OIOS has identified in the current system. In the opinion of OIOS, the proposal represents a significant advancement towards streamlining the recruitment process. Its proactive approach should set an example for other departments and offices in developing their reform strategies. At the time of the audit, this reform initiative was still in the proposal stage, and OIOS was not provided with sufficient details to enable a full analysis. Nevertheless, on the basis of its preliminary evaluation of the information available, OIOS has made some observations on the proposal, which are discussed below.

33. The reform proposal indicates that programme managers would be able to obtain a roster of qualified candidates before requesting a vacancy announcement. If qualified candidates were identified on the roster, no vacancy announcement would be issued. Since this initiative could significantly alter the method by which candidates are selected, in the opinion of OIOS, the mechanism used to develop and maintain the roster of qualified candidates must be carefully considered.

34. Under the proposal, candidate evaluation criteria are to be developed by programme managers, and reviewed and confirmed by a joint staff/management review body in advance. After selection, the review body would only examine procedural compliance with the criteria. Therefore, the development of adequate criteria is critical to ensuring the consistency of evaluations across departments and the recruitment of the best candidate. Questions also arise as to the extent to which institutional elements, such as geographical and gender balance distribution, will be considered and how they will be weighted. Furthermore, it is not clear how subjective criteria, linked to the identified core competencies of the Organization, such as attitude or creativity will be quantified or assessed. The Office of Human Resources Management has yet to address these issues and incorporate them into clear policies and concrete operational guidance.

The Office of Human Resources Management agrees the core competencies that have been identified for the Organization need to be made measurable in order to evaluate the extent to which they are taken into consideration in recruitment, placement and promotion. As a positive step, the Office has provided guidelines to departments and offices on how to promote understanding and application of the competencies, including incorporation in their vacancy announcements and performance appraisals. In addition, workshops and training in competency-based interviewing have been conducted.

III. The recruitment process

A. Overall recruitment timelines

35. In its 1997 recruitment audit report, OIOS indicated that the average time required to recruit new staff was 461 days. To determine whether recruitment time had improved, OIOS obtained data from the Office of Human Resources Management on 1999 recruitment activities.[2] The basic data was obtained from the IMIS Rectrack module. However, because the data contained in the database was incomplete and inconsistent, OIOS obtained additional information by manually examining recruitment files. The OIOS analysis showed that, for the cases it reviewed, the recruitment processing time, on average, was reduced from 388 days to 275 days (see table). The most significant reduction in time (107 days) was achieved between the departmental recommendation and the approval by the appointment and promotion bodies.

[2] In order to provide an accurate representation of the Office of Human Resources Management's management of the process, the 1999 calculation eliminated steps not within the Office's control, such as the time between the final approval and the reporting date. To ensure a meaningful comparison, these steps were also eliminated from the 1996 calculation, which reduced the overall timeline from 461 days to 388 days.

Table
Recruitment process timeline

	Process steps		Processing time (average no. of days)	
	From	*To*	*1998*	*1999*
A	Department request for vacancy announcement	Vacancy announcement issuance	45	17
B	Vacancy announcement issuance	Vacancy announcement deadline	31	36[a]
C	Vacancy announcement deadline	Shortlist sent to Department	19	21
D	Shortlist sent to Department	Department recommendation	121	152
E	Department recommendation	Appointment and promotion body recommendation	151	44
F	Appointment and promotion body recommendation	Secretary-General's approval	21	5
	Entire process		**388**	**275**

[a] The General Assembly mandates 60-day posting for all external vacancy announcements while internal vacancy announcements are posted for 21 days.

36. Although the overall recruitment processing time has been reduced, OIOS found that the departmental decision-making phase has actually increased since 1996. Following receipt of the Office of Human Resources Management's shortlist of candidates, substantive departments took an average of 152 days to make recommendations, which represents a 26 per cent increase from the 121 days reported in 1997. This indicates that currently, more than one-half of the processing time can actually be attributed to the substantive departments. Through a limited review of recruitment files, OIOS identified some of the potential causes for the delays in departmental recruiting activities, which included the lack of qualified candidates on the shortlist, and elaborate, time-consuming internal evaluation processes.

37. The Office of Human Resources Management's recruitment reform proposal attempts to address delays by delegating full decision-making authority to managers, with corresponding accountability for the decisions reached. The goal is to reduce the departmental selection time to 30 days; an 80 per cent reduction from the current 152-day average, as computed by OIOS. However, considering the magnitude of the targeted reduction and the fact that the Office of Human Resources Management has not provided specific guidance on actions to be taken by departments, it is unclear how the Secretariat will achieve this target.

B. Vacancy announcements

38. Vacancy announcements are posted on bulletin boards, displayed on e-mail bulletin boards and on the Internet web site and mailed to over 1,200 locations worldwide. The Office of Human Resources Management stated that the use of web sites has been quite effective in reaching potential candidates because the number of applications has increased significantly. However, the Office has not evaluated the relative effectiveness of each outreach method. Questions remain as to the effectiveness of mailing announcements to 1,200 worldwide locations in terms of the cost and timeliness of information delivery to potential candidates.

39. Currently, announcements are listed in chronological order of issuance, whereas potential candidates are generally interested in vacancies relating specifically to their areas of expertise and years of experience (and grade level, in the case of internal applicants). To better facilitate the search effort for potential candidates, vacancy announcements should be sorted, at a minimum, by occupational category and grade level. In the longer-term, adding a search function would greatly improve the functionality of these media.

40. Recruitment begins with the advertising of the post. Therefore, an examination of the criteria used to develop the vacancy announcement is important. The vacancy announcement is the primary mechanism for matching an applicant with the position. Successful recruitment relies on a cogent, accurate description of the function and the skills required to effectively perform the duties of the position. The OIOS review of recruitment files, conducted in connection with the 1999 timeline calculation, showed the need for the Office of Human Resources Management to actively promote and monitor the development by departments of realistic post requirements in vacancy announcements.

41. Current trends in recruitment, as described in the 12 March 1999 task team report entitled "Improving recruitment, placement and promotion in the United Nations Secretariat",[3] emphasize the need to identify unique skills required for each specific position in contrast to the United Nations standard approach. Often, the years of experience and/or academic degree requirements remained static. If the Organization is to meet its commitment to develop a cadre of young, qualified, mobile personnel, the Office of Human Resources Management will need to guide departments in re-evaluating standard requirements and developing realistic vacancy announcements reflecting the pertinent competencies, skills and level of experience needed to meet the requirement of the position.

42. Experience in the relevant field is sometimes considered to be an alternative to academic qualifications. In this connection, OIOS observed improvement in vacancy announcements issued for a number of posts in the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). The announcements stated that "a candidate with a Bachelor's Degree backed by ample experience may be considered for selection". Similarly, an advanced university degree was not required in the recently circulated vacancy announcements in the area of information technology. OIOS supports this new, creative approach and urges its application to other vacancy announcements.

43. Specifying years of experience too narrowly may prevent otherwise qualified candidates from applying for vacancies. Furthermore, requiring lengthy periods of experience could eliminate many potentially suitable female candidates (considering the relatively short history of women in the professional workplace in some developing countries), as well as many other young professionals. In this regard, OIOS noted that the Office of Human Resources Management tried to reduce the required minimum years of experience through the issuance of a new vacancy management guideline (VM-98) in 1998. According to the Office's management, programme managers resisted this change and therefore the Office has temporarily suspended implementation. Additionally, specifying a maximum number of years of experience does not appear to serve any purpose. At times, vacancy announcements describe the field of experience too narrowly. Requiring prior experience with United Nations-related systems, such as IMIS, or specific United Nations committees effectively disqualifies external candidates from consideration despite external circulation of vacancy announcements.

C. Other methods of identifying candidates

44. The number of applications received by the Office of Human Resources Management from external candidates increased from approximately 20,800 in 1997 to 45,000 in 1999. All external vacancy announcements are advertised through the Organization's web site and more applications are received via the Internet, which resulted in an increase in the number of applications from 200 in 1997 to 27,000 in 1999. The Office's Staffing Support Section reviews the candidates' applications against the requirements of the vacancy announcement and forwards a listing of those candidates meeting the criteria to the requesting department. The Section also maintains a roster of external candidates for future consideration. In the view of OIOS, a roster of external candidates, if used properly, can be an efficient and effective recruitment tool. However, OIOS has identified several problems relating to roster management.

45. The Staffing Support Section has not established a clear policy for managing its roster of external candidates. Specifically, it has not defined the length of time a candidate should be listed on the roster, and there is no procedure for periodically updating candidate information. In addition, external candidates who have been recruited are not deleted from the roster. Failure to update the roster will eventually reduce its usefulness.

46. The roster's structure and contents do not facilitate an efficient search for candidates meeting specified criteria. Currently, the roster is prepared using a basic spreadsheet application designed for numeric calculations. To better achieve its objectives of providing appropriate candidate information for specific vacancies, it is desirable to construct the roster using a database management system. Considering the large number of candidates on the roster (over 800), a

[3] The report stated, for instance, that "... the criteria for selection are often inadequate. Job descriptions frequently stress the irrelevant (such as the length of time spent in a particular post or at a particular level) at the expense of the important (such as a proven track record, skills and competencies)."

search function is essential. The roster should also use standardized sets of keywords to facilitate the search. The current roster uses different words for similar functions, such as economics/economist and environment/environmental science/environmental studies. Vague and abstract keywords, such as analysis, advocacy, expertise or sciences are also used.

47. In 1999, the Staffing Support Section created a new roster. The Section could not, however, provide any substantive data on how extensively they utilized the roster to identify candidates. Furthermore, this roster, which could be a significant resource for candidate search and selection, is not available to programme managers.

48. To address the need for qualified candidates who are not easily solicited through traditional vacancy announcements, the Staffing Support Section launched an executive search programme on an ad hoc request basis. It conducted 19 searches in 1998 and 13 searches in 1999. The programme included advertising in international magazines and newspapers, and contacting professional associations directly. While this innovative approach is commendable, the Section has not evaluated the results of the programme in terms of cost and benefits, nor is there any data available on the number of people recruited in this manner.

D. Recruitment clearance process

49. Once the recommended candidate is approved, the relevant units (clusters) in the Office of Human Resources Management initiate the clearance process, which includes verifying educational credentials, checking references and completing the medical clearance. Correspondence is conducted via the mail, and faxes are also used to expedite the process. However, OIOS noted that OHRM does not routinely utilize other alternatives, such as e-mail, even when candidates provide e-mail addresses.

50. The previous OIOS audit recommended that the practice of asking questions concerning the character of candidates in reference letters to former/current employers be discontinued, and that questions be limited to factual employment data. This recommendation was based on the finding that employers were reluctant to answer character-related questions, which delayed the entire reference check process. However, the current audit found that the Office of Human Resources Management still includes character questions in the reference letter. Its management stated that the information is still required since character is an important quality to verify before recruiting a candidate. However, it indicated that it would consider making character questions optional in order to avoid delays.

IV. National Competitive Examination

51. In 1999, the Staffing Support Section made numerous improvements in the National Competitive Examination recruitment area. These included updating information in the roster, and increasing the number of candidates recruited through the National Competitive Examination.

52. Despite the Office of Human Resources Management's efforts to enhance recruitment through the National Competitive Examination and the availability of candidates, some managers are still reluctant to recruit these candidates, leaving many P-2 posts vacant. As of 31 December 1999, of the 444 regular budget P-2/1 posts, 57 or 13 per cent were vacant. The potential causes could be the length of the process or misalignment between the staffing requirements and the qualifications of National Competitive Examination candidates. Only 73 candidates were recruited under the National Competitive Examination in 1999.

53. The Examinations and Tests Section, recognizing these issues, is planning an extensive review of the effectiveness of the National Competitive Examination process. OIOS supports this effort and reiterates the importance of conducting an assessment of programme managers' needs to more specifically identify their expectations of the National Competitive Examination programme.

54. Generally, examinations are held for major occupational categories. However, when requested, an examination can be held on very specific occupational categories. For example, in 1999, there were examinations for "information technology on databases of mineral resources" and "transportation of dangerous goods". Considering that the P-2 position is intended for entry-level junior professionals, in the view of OIOS, these types of examinations run contrary to the purpose of the National Competitive Examination, which is to recruit junior-level professionals and not

experts in specialized disciplines. In the opinion of OIOS, which is shared in principle by the Office of Human Resources Management, the standard National Competitive Examination categories should be sufficient to evaluate the knowledge and skills required for all P-2 positions. Specialized expertise can be developed within the Organization as long as candidates possess basic abilities. However, the Office of Human Resources Management commented that *this view is not universally shared by all programme managers, some of whom attach great importance to specialized examinations.*

V. Conclusions

55. In the view of OIOS, the success of the Office of Human Resources Management's recruitment and reform efforts will, to a large extent, depend on the Office's commitment to implementing the following key concepts:

(a) Clear, concrete goals aligned with departmental business plans and a strategic plan of action;

(b) A coordinated, integrated approach that incorporates all initiatives;

(c) Specific metrics by which to measure progress.

56. The Office of Human Resources Management responded to the draft report that: *"The first round of planning initiated by the Office of Human Resources Management in 1999 was intentionally kept at the departmental level to make it practical and feasible, and to build confidence and cooperation between the Office and departments for such an unprecedented undertaking. The Office is now confident that the organization may be ready to begin a second, more complex level of 'strategic' planning. In the second round of planning, within the framework of the General Assembly mandates, departmental programme plans will form the basis for a comprehensive organizational staffing plan, leading to appropriate recruitment initiatives and overall recruitment goals for the organization, both short- and long-term."*

VI. Recommendations

57. The following recommendations, in the view of OIOS, will further support the Organization's efforts to create a flexible, transparent and efficient recruitment process.

Recommendation 1

The Office of Human Resources Management should develop a human resource management strategic plan to implement the Secretary-General's vision for reform and the mandates of the General Assembly. This strategic approach should take into account current and future environmental factors and consist of the following:

(a) Articulating clearly stated goals, which are measurable and feasible;

(b) Developing strategies and action plans to facilitate achievement of goals;

(c) Timely monitoring and evaluation of goal achievement (AM/2000/43/01).

The Office of Human Resources Management intends to continue efforts to implement this recommendation in close cooperation with departments and offices.

Recommendation 2

The Office of Human Resources Management should work closely with departments to develop targets and operational guidance for geographic distribution and gender balance within established timeframes, and provide each department's results to the Secretary-General (AM/2000/43/02).

The Office of Human Resources Management reiterates its comments regarding recommendation 1. Further, regards gender balance, the Office will cooperate with the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women.

Recommendation 3

The Office of Human Resources Management should develop a detailed action plan on how to utilize skills inventory data, particularly in connection with

the reform proposal on recruitment, promotion and placement (AM/2000/43/03).

The Office of Human Resources Management supports this recommendation and will develop the linkages with the proposed recruitment, promotion and placement system once the General Assembly has endorsed the proposed system.

Recommendation 4

The Office of Human Resources Management, in consultation with the IMIS project team, should improve human resources information management by: (a) integrating the individual geographic databases; (b) enhancing the quality of data in the personnel action module through appropriate feedback to users; (c) monitoring the data input into the Rectrack module, and (d) preparing periodic reports to evaluate the performance of the recruitment process (AM/2000/43/04).

The Office of Human Resources Management, as the leader in launching the IMIS module for recruitment tracking and as its most active user, welcomes this recommendation and will continue to work closely with the IMIS project team and others to ensure fuller usage of Rectrack by all concerned. Improvements in Actions (a) and (b) above are already part of the work schedule.

Recommendation 5

The Office of Human Resources Management should:

(a) Explore the feasibility of automating the exit survey process to facilitate direct administration by the Office of Human Resources Management;

(b) Analyse the results of these surveys and incorporate them into the human resources management planning process (AM/2000/43/05).

The Office of Human Resources Management already started to implement this recommendation in 1999 and intends to implement it fully.

Recommendation 6

The Office of Human Resources Management should establish the planning function as a departmental priority to ensure ongoing development of strategic plans and coordination of the Office's initiatives (AM/2000/43/06).

The Office of Human Resources Management has accorded great importance to its planning function in the past few years, and will continue to refine it. Progress has been achieved within existing limited resources. As the IMIS project nears its conclusion, such resources can be made available for the planning function.

Recommendation 7

In order to protect the integrity of the recruitment process and ensure its transparency, the Office of Human Resources Management should develop detailed plans for implementing the reform proposal on recruitment, promotion and placement. The plans should include, but not be limited to, establishing the following:

(a) Candidate evaluation criteria in terms of scoring and weighting methods for considering subjective and institutional factors;

(b) A detailed strategy for achieving the target process time of 30 days in the departmental candidate selection process (AM/2000/43/07).

Having done much preliminary work in this area, the Office of Human Resources Management values this recommendation and, once the General Assembly has endorsed the proposal, will work with departments to formulate a balanced evaluation system and to propose an implementation plan for faster action without compromising the ultimate goals of recruitment.

Recommendation 8

The Office of Human Resources Management should conduct in-depth analyses of human resources management statistics, and develop appropriate benchmarks for each human resources indicator to evaluate combined and individual departmental human

resources management performance against a desired range (AM/2000/43/08).

The Office of Human Resources Management accepts this recommendation and will take it into account when formulating its next budget and programme plan, as well as the departmental human resources plans.

Recommendation 9

The Office of Human Resources Management should refine its outreach strategy by: (a) conducting cost benefit analyses of alternative recruiting mechanisms, including comprehensive mailing of vacancy announcements and the executive search programme; and (b) focusing its resources on the more cost-effective methods (AM/2000/43/09).

The Office of Human Resources Management accepts this recommendation and will examine its various outreach methods in order to retain, refine and utilize those deemed most effective.

Recommendation 10

The Office of Human Resources Management should improve the functionality of the web site and the e-mail bulletin board by sorting vacancy announcements according to occupational category and grade level, and by adding a keyword search function (AM/2000/43/10).

The Office of Human Resources Management welcomes this recommendation and has already improved its electronic listing of vacancy announcements accordingly. It is hoping to add a search function in the near future. Additional improvements are foreseen by year-end.

Recommendation 11

The Office of Human Resources Management, working closely with programme managers, should take the lead in re-evaluating the standard academic degree and years of experience requirements for specific posts and introduce flexible and relevant education and experience requirements in vacancy announcements (AM/2000/43/11).

The Office of Human Resources Management welcomes this recommendation. It is presently experimenting, in close cooperation with ECA, with a new formula of vacancy announcements in a special recruitment campaign launched in 2000 intended to significantly reduce the vacancy rate at ECA. The experience has so far produced positive results, and lessons learned will be applied to all other vacancy announcements.

Recommendation 12

The Office of Human Resources Management should do the following:

(a) Establish a policy for managing and disseminating the roster of external candidates, including the procedures for periodically updating the roster, evaluating its utilization and developing standard sets of keywords for each functional category;

(b) Explore the feasibility of installing a commercial software package to facilitate the search function (AM/2000/43/12).

The Office of Human Resources Management agrees with this recommendation. Improvements have already been introduced in updating the roster. The efforts in this respect will be continued until the roster becomes a fully useful recruitment tool.

Recommendation 13

The Office of Human Resources Management should make more extensive use of modern tools, such as e-mail and faxes to expedite the recruitment process (AM/2000/43/13).

The Office of Human Resources Management supports this recommendation. In revamping the recruitment of candidates from the National Competitive Examination roster, the Office has fully integrated the usage of e-mail systems, and will continue to expand its usage of the Internet. For places where the Internet is not accessible, the Office will continue to use regular mail or facsimile.

Recommendation 14

In order to avoid delays in checking references with former/current employers, the Office of Human Resources Management should make character reference questions optional (AM/2000/43/14).

OHRM agrees with this recommendation and will make the use of character reference questions optional.

Recommendation 15

The Office of Human Resources Management should conduct a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of the National Competitive Examination system and evaluate alternative approaches, including:

(a) Assessing managerial needs and realigning the scope and quality of the examination with those needs;

(b) Re-examining the costs of the administration of examinations in terms of its benefit;

(c) Evaluating the extent to which the programme is successful in drawing candidates from unrepresented or under-represented countries;

(d) Discontinuing specialized examinations to fill specific posts (AM/2000/43/15).

The Office of Human Resources Management decided to undertake such a review before the audit was conducted and thus readily agrees with the recommendation. The review is expected to be completed by the end of 2000. Thereafter, the Office will commence implementation of its findings.

(*Signed*) Dileep **Nair**
Under-Secretary-General for
Internal Oversight Services